

THE PAST AND PRESENT STATUS AND DISTRIBUTION OF THE GREY-CRESTED HELMET SHRIKE *PRIONOPS POLIOLOPHA*

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Hall & Moreau (1970) refer to the Grey-crested Helmet Shrike *Prionops poliolopha* as replacing the Helmet Shrike *P. plumata* in the Kenya highlands. *Prionops poliolopha* is described in Britton (1980) as endemic to woodlands east and south of Lake Victoria at 1200-2000 m, typically in *Acacia drepanolobium* or leleshwa *Tarchonanthus*.

However, despite the fact that this species exhibits the noisy and prominent habits of its family, confirmed records of its occurrence are few, and several authors comment on its rarity (e.g. van Someren 1932, Jackson 1938, Turner 1977, Britton 1980). Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1960) describe its occurrence in Kenya as "somewhat erratic".

This paper reviews the past and present records of *P. poliolopha*, and relates a new series of observations from the Nakuru area. For convenience, the species' range is considered under four main areas.

THE RECORDS

Naivasha-Kedong Valley area

Fischer & Reichenow (1884) recorded the type at Naivasha, from a female killed "off the nest" on 11 May. Jackson (1901) described the collection of an adult female and a juvenile male from a small flock in the Kedong Valley on 17 April 1896, and this record is also quoted by Reichenow (1900-1905).

Van Someren (1922) mentioned it as collected by Doherty at Escarpment Station, Uplands (1°03'S, 36°39'E); he also remarked on the destruction of its habitat. On 4 February 1923, V.G.L. van Someren collected a female at Naivasha; this was followed by a male and a subadult male on 26 June 1925, in the Kedong Valley (*Catalogue of East Africa and Uganda birds collected by V.G.L. van Someren 1910-1951*). Van Someren (1932) mentioned what are presumably these specimens, while summing up the species' status as "not very common".

On 12 February 1926 E.H. Ward collected a male from 'Sterndale', Naivasha (National Museum Collection, Nairobi). Sclater (1930) mentioned the locality 'Naivasha', which presumably includes Doherty's Escarpment specimen.

Jackson (1938) derived his summary of the distribution of the species from Sclater (1930), and quoted the Escarpment record (van Someren 1922), and the type from Naivasha (Fischer & Reichenow 1884). His only personal observation of the bird was the Kedong family party in 1896.

Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1960) referred to the occurrence of the species in central Kenya, and mentioned the breeding at Naivasha, while White (1962) and Hall & Moreau (1970) also used earlier records from this area.

Turner (1977) noted the absence of recent records from Naivasha-Kedong and attributed its apparently complete disappearance to recent rural development. P.L. Britton (*in litt.*) notes the absence of published records from this area during the last 50 years.

Kenya-Tanzania border areas

Reichenow (1900-1905) recorded the collection of the species by O. Neumann in January from Ssero (or Scero) (1°15'S, 35°30'E), which is in the Loita Plains area.

The Willoughby-Lowe catalogue (housed in the National Museum, Nairobi) lists a female, taken on the Amala River (0°45'S, 35°25'E) on 14 October 1912, which was also mentioned by Jackson (1938). Van Someren (1932) also collected a bird

from this locality, and Sclater (1930) presumably used one or both of these specimens to define the range from this locality southwestwards into Tanzania. Bowen (1931) found it to be common in the Ikoma (2°05'S, 34°37'E) region of northern Tanzania.

F.N. Betts (unpublished MS) encountered it several times in the Narok District between 1948 and 1952, between the town of Narok (1°05'S, 35°52'E) and the southern part of the Uaso Nyiro (1°55'S, 36°07'E), and at the foot of the Loita Hills. In his account of the resident breeding birds of southwest Kenya (Betts 1966) he mentions one record, of a flock "of several adults and a number of newly fledged young" near Narok on 27 May (no year given but between 1948 and 1952).

J.G. Williams collected an adult male on 19 August 1959, at Mosiro (1°30'S, 36°06'E) in Narok District, altitude 1200 m (National Museum, Nairobi). Williams (1963) described it as uncommon in the bush of central southern Kenya and northern Tanzania, but not uncommon around Loliondo (2°03'S, 35°37'E) in northern Tanzania, where he observed it in mixed flocks with *P. plumata*. This constitutes the only record of sympatry between these two species, and is quoted by Hall & Moreau (1970). Williams (1967) recorded it without details or comment from the Masai Mara Reserve in Kenya, while Williams & Arlott (1980) repeat the Loliondo sympatry note, but now (as opposed to Williams (1963)) consider it a "very uncommon" bird of the bush country.

D.A. Turner (pers. comm.) notes it as a local and uncommon resident of the northern Serengeti (Mara Region), Tanzania, particularly where whistling thorn *Acacia drepanolobium* is dominant. He has also recorded it "many times" within a 5 km radius of Keekorok Lodge (1°38'S, 35°16'E), Masai Mara Game Reserve, and considers that it is possibly resident in this part of Kenya.

L.L. Short collected two specimens from Lion Camp, Olonganaioy Lugger (1°18'S, 35°49'E), 25 km south southwest of Narok, both at an altitude of 1770 m. The first was a female on 10 July 1978, while the second was a male two days later (National Museum, Nairobi); the habitat is described as "riparian fever trees", i.e. *Acacia xanthophloea*.

Britton (1980) states that "most records are from border areas in Narok and Serengeti."

South of Lake Victoria

Reichenow (1900-1905) quoted three records from this area from previous German collectors. O. Neumann took the species in June in Muansa, which Reichenow's map shows to be modern Mwanza (2°31'S, 34°54'E), and from the Ngarre Mousse River (1°45'S, 35°00'E) during January. R. Böhm and von Trotha collected it during December from the Ugalla River, which is a tributary of the Malagarisi River, which flows into Lake Tanganyika just south of Kigoma (4°52'S, 29°37'E).

Jackson (1938) quotes localities from Reichenow (1900-1905), including Unyamwezi, which is also in the Kigoma-Tabora area.

These early records thus extend the range dramatically southwestwards to about 5°S in the Kigoma-Tabora region, but appear to form the only evidence for the occurrence of the species there. They are utilized, in one form or another, by Sclater (1930), Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1960), White (1962) and Hall & Moreau (1970), the last noting the range "into much lower and drier country as far as Tabora" (5°01'S, 32°48'E).

As for Naivasha-Kedong, Britton (1980) could detail no records from the Tabora Region "in recent decades".

Nakuru area

Williams (1967) describes the species as "uncommon" in Lake Nakuru National Park, but gives no supporting details; for this reason the locality is not included by Britton (1980). The following recent series of observations thus properly documents the occurrence of the bird up to 60 km north of its hither-

to known range, as well as providing the first records from the central Kenya rift since 1926.

Table 1
Recent Nakuru area sight records of the Grey-crested Helmet Shrike

Date	No.	Habitat	Area	Observers
25.10.78	9	Riverine <i>Acacia xanthophloea</i>	1.6 km N of Naishi Ranger Post, LNNP	I.G.Marshall
04.02.79	3	<i>A. xanthophloea</i> woodland	near Makalia Bridge LNNP	I.G.Marshall
02.10.80	5	ditto	SE corner LNNP	R.R.Izagiriza & ADL
09.11.80	11	ditto	between Naishi & Makalis Falls, LNNP	I.G.Marshall
14.12.80	6	<i>Tarchonanthus</i> , <i>Protea</i> , patches of richer woodland and coarse grasses	W side of Menengai Crater, Nakuru	P.L. & H.A. Britton & R. Boy

'No.' refers to the number of birds in the flock; LNNP = Lake Nakuru National Park

The concentration of records from Lake Nakuru does not mean that the bird is common there. I.G. Marshall has extensively searched the vicinity of his sightings on foot and failed to relocate the birds, as did the author and R.R. Izagiriza on the day after their record. Ornithologists currently resident in the Park and routinely noting birds there for over a year have not seen this species (V. Haas, pers. comm.); earlier resident observers report irregular sightings in the periods February-May and even July-August, but these records lack detail and confirmation.

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

Changes in distribution

From the existing records, it is clear that the Grey-crested Helmet Shrike has never been a numerous bird, certainly far less abundant than the closely related *P. plumata*. Only Bowen (1931) regarded *P. polioloepha* as common, in northern Tanzania.

Since its discovery in 1884, it has apparently become extinct in the Naivasha-Kedong area, and possibly also in areas of Tanzania south of Lake Victoria. Apart from the Nakuru sightings, recent records suggest that its range has contracted into the Kenya-Tanzania border areas in the Serengeti-Mara and Loita-Loliondo regions.

The reasons for these changes are not clear. V.G.L. van Someren, as early as 1922, noted that the forest and scrub from which Doherty had collected his Escarpment specimen(s) had since been cut down or burnt, "and the entire aspect of the country altered". Turner (1977) also blames "recent rural development" for the disappearance of the species from the Naivasha-Kedong area, and makes the point that little is known of its breeding biology or habitat requirements. Several of the recent records have been from *Acacia xanthophloea* country, which certainly still exists around Naivasha.

A possible explanation for the lack of records is misidentification as *P. plumata*, particularly by observers not acquainted with *P. polioloepha*, and/or

assuming the commoner of the two species. The plumage of both species is essentially black and white, with a white bar visible on the closed wing (varying racially in *plumata*) and a white tip to the tail; both have a grey crown and nape, becoming darker behind the ear coverts.

The unique features of *poliolopha* are the yellow eye, the lack of eye wattles, the tuft-like grey crest on the rear of the crown, and the blackish spot on the side of the breast. But in the field, the author considered that the eye colour of *poliolopha* could be mistaken for the wattle colour of *plumata*, i.e. as a yellow flash/colouration in the eye area, while, unless seen clearly, the crest could be taken for part of the general grey crown colour of *plumata*; both species have a whiter crest on the forehead. P.L. Britton, H.A. Britton and I.G. Marshall all comment on the larger size of *poliolopha*, i.e. compared to *plumata*, but this point is really useful only to observers with previous knowledge of at least one of the species.

Hence, the only unmistakable feature of *poliolopha* is the blackish spot on the side of the breast, which is most distinctive when the bird is viewed from the front. Interspecific confusion is thus quite possible.

While the recent absence of sightings in the Naivasha-Kedong area cannot be attributed to lack of observers, this could well be a factor in less frequently visited regions, such as Mwanza, Tabora and Loliondo. Hence, the recent absence of the species in these regions could be, at least in part, illusory.

The Nakuru records

The five recent sightings around Nakuru fall between October and February, while the only two breeding records for the species are in April and May (Brown & Britton 1980). Presence of the species at Nakuru during the breeding season requires confirmation.

The various *Prionops* species have a tendency to forage for food over long distances (Britton 1980), and I.G. Marshall (pers. comm.) comments on this point with reference to his Nakuru *poliolopha* sightings. Van Someren (1932) gives three examples of the erratic appearance of the related *plumata*, which were probably due to these long distance movements. The clustering of the sightings in the southeast corner of Lake Nakuru National Park could reflect the habit, recorded by Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1960) for *plumata*, of flocks repeatedly following the same foraging route, though in these cases over widely spaced intervals.

The Nakuru records probably refer to highly mobile flocks foraging long distances from their breeding areas. Judging from the above discussion, these areas are probably to the southwest, along the Kenya-Tanzania border, such that, to reach Nakuru, birds would have to cross the Mau highlands, or circumvent them to the south. Williams' (1967) reference to the species at Nakuru implies that these movements are none too recent an innovation. Certainly the under-watched nature of the Mau and its forested western slopes could preclude detection of any 'passage'.

CONCLUSIONS

Since its discovery 97 years ago, the Grey-crested Helmet Shrike has apparently become extinct in the Naivasha-Kedong area of Kenya, and possibly also in the Mwanza-Tabora area of northern Tanzania. The reasons for these changes are not clear, but probably involve habitat modifications.

The population now appears to be centred on, and presumably breeding in, the Kenya-Tanzania border areas, between the eastern rift and Lake Victoria. Foraging parties regularly reach Nakuru.

The paucity of records probably reflects a small total population of the species, moving erratically through large, poorly observed areas, combined with possible misidentification as *P. plumata*.

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